



# What's Up, DOC?

Volume 7, Number 17

September 19, 2006

California Department of Conservation Employee Newsletter

## Former Farmer is Pick of the Crop

### Brian Leahy Named to Head DLRP

When **Brian Leahy** was in his 20s, his dream was to create an agricultural utopia in the Central Valley: biologically diverse, verdant, productive farmland shielded from development.

"The farmland there is just incredible, a gift from God," said Leahy, a longtime farmer himself.

Now, as the newly named chief of the Division of Land Resource Protection, Leahy, 50, has downsized his goals a bit, although his ultimate aim remains protecting farmland. The population of the Central Valley has grown at a phenomenal rate in the last couple of decades, and there are now many more houses and strip malls than fruit stands.

"The challenge we face these days is figuring out how to accommodate growth while allowing farming in the future," he said. "The fortunate thing is that people are more and more starting to value having access to locally grown food. That appreciation can help us build our programs."

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Leahy on August 30, and Leahy's first day in the office was September 5. Well versed in DLRP programs because of his background

as both a Williamson Act landowner and former executive director of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts (CARCD), Leahy has hit the ground running.



Resources Secretary Mike Chrisman (left) swears in Brian Leahy as head of DLRP. Holding the Bible is Leahy's fiancée, Tina Cannon.

"Brian was a rancher for 20 years and has worked with a number of agricultural organizations," Director **Bridgett Luther** said. "He also has a background in the law. His diverse experience

gives him a unique perspective that will help our efforts.

“I want to also thank **Dennis O'Bryant** (head of the Williamson Act program) for his service in the capacity as acting assistant director. Dennis has helped DLRP and the department through some controversial policy and program implementation issues.”

Before joining a start-up company, EcoFacilitation, as interim development director last January, Leahy worked closely with DLRP and many of the division's constituents in his capacity with CARCD. Leahy also has connections at the Department of Fish and Game; his fiancée, **Tina Cannon**, is an environmental attorney there. They plan to marry next July.

“She has a 12-year-old son (Cameron), and I'm experiencing the joys and challenges of raising a boy for the first time,” Leahy said.

Leahy has two grown daughters. His eldest, Whalin, spent two years working on farms in Europe after graduating from college and is now going to medical school. His youngest, Thea, was a student at Tulane University in New Orleans who transferred to Chico State University after Hurricane Katrina.

From 2000-2004, Leahy was president of California Certified Organic Farmers, a nonprofit organization that certifies 1,200 members representing about \$1 billion in organic sales. He helped the organization expand its market and its outreach to the public.

Leahy has been on the board of directors of the Organic Trade Association, a member of the California Biotechnology Task Force Advisory Committee, and has served in a wide variety of positions with groups interested in agricultural issues in California and Nebraska.

“I feel well prepared for this new challenge and look forward to working with the great people at DLRP who have done so much for agriculture in California,” Leahy said.

While about 17 million acres are enrolled in the Williamson Act program, which grants landowners a potential tax break for a commitment to keep their land in agricultural use, Leahy thinks building DLRP's constituency will be one of his chief challenges.

“The Williamson Act is a huge deal because it touches so much – agriculture, growth, habitat, open space,” he said. “But still, relatively few people know about us. We have to sell our programs, market the things we do. For example, our Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program creates incredible maps for the agricultural and planning communities. But we also can make inroads with the environmental, recreation and health communities.”

It was, quite literally, a grassroots position that perhaps best prepared Leahy to head DLRP. From 1980-2001, he owned Cherokee Ranch, Inc. in Chico, a 900-acre rice farm on the cutting edge of the organic and biodiversity movement. If anyone knows that farmers can have a tough row to hoe – and that DLRP's programs can help – it's Leahy.

“I learned to farm from my father-in-law at the time,” Leahy said. “He told me, ‘You need a strong back and a good constitution.’ Farming is like any small- or medium-sized business. It's tough. You have to put a lot into it. It's capital-intensive and it's hard to make enough money.

In the early '90s, Leahy moved to Nebraska for a few years so his then-wife could attend medical school at Creighton University in Omaha. Leahy continued to farm ... briefly.

Properly it will work out that way, here, too.